

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 29 | Issue 3

Article 3

7-1-2012

The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism

Katherin A. Rogers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Rogers, Katherin A. (2012) "The Divine Controller Argument for Incompatibilism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

THE DIVINE CONTROLLER ARGUMENT FOR INCOMPATIBILISM

Katherin A. Rogers

Incompatibilists hold that, in order for you to be responsible, your choices must come from yourself; thus, determinism is incompatible with responsibility. One way of defending this claim is the Controller Argument: You are not responsible if your choices are caused by a controller, and natural determinism is relevantly similar to such control, therefore . . . Q.E.D. Compatibilists dispute both of these premises, insisting upon a relevant dissimilarity, or allowing, in a *tollens* move, that since we can be determined and responsible, we can be controlled and responsible. Positing a *divine* controller strengthens the argument against these two responses.

I. Introduction

Many incompatibilists hold that in order for you to be morally responsible such that you might truly deserve praise and blame, reward and punishment, your choices must be free in that they are “up to you” in a robust way. You must be able to act “from yourself” (*a se*) and so you have what can be termed *aseity*.¹ They judge that, if determinism is true, then your choices are not “up to you” in the right way, and so determinism and moral responsibility are incompatible. One recent way of attempting to show this is through the “controller” argument.² In the present paper I argue that hypothesizing a *divine* controller strengthens the argument in a number of ways, allowing the defender to respond successfully to the two major criticisms advanced against the argument.

The controller argument goes like this: Hypothesize a controller—a mad neuroscientist or a megalomaniac behavioral engineer—who causes you to choose to do something (X) in such a way that your choice is necessitated. (In this context “cause” should be understood in a broad, and

¹This is the position defended by Anselm of Canterbury, arguably the first to develop a systematic analysis of libertarian freedom. See Katherin Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59–60.

²Recent examples include Robert Kane, who proposes the argument as part of his defense of libertarianism in *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64–71, and Derk Pereboom, who uses it to bolster a medium-hard determinism in “Determinism al Dente,” *Nous* 29 (1995), 21–45. These arguments have also been called “manipulator” arguments, but I will argue that “manipulation” is not the right term to describe *divine* control.



stronger than counterfactual, sense. To cause something is to exert some force or power to produce an effect. The controller *brings it about*.) Your choice to X comes about in such a way that you could not possibly fail to choose to X. And suppose that the controller controls without coercion, and you do not even know of his activity. To adopt Robert Kane's terminology, he is a "covert, nonconstraining controller" (CNC).³ You might "feel" free, but nonetheless, the argument goes, it is intuitively obvious that you cannot be held responsible for the choice to X. Why not? Because someone else made you make the choice. But, continues the incompatibilist, analysis of the controller hypothesis shows that what precludes your having moral responsibility is not so much that there is someone else involved in your choice, but that their involvement causally necessitates your choice. If your choice is causally necessitated by something other than yourself, then you cannot be responsible for it.⁴ But if determinism is true, everything is causally necessitated. Your choices are the inevitable product of something not yourself. So, in a deterministic universe, no human choices are free in a sense which can ground moral responsibility.⁵

In response, the compatibilist who agrees with the initial intuition concerning the controlled agent's lack of responsibility may reject the claim that the causally necessitating factors at work in a deterministic universe are the same or relevantly similar to those in the controller scenario, and so he can argue that the conclusion need not follow. Alternatively, if the compatibilist grants that the controller as cause and the deterministic universe as cause are the same or relevantly similar he can conclude that the original intuition was misleading. Just as we can be free and responsible in a determinist universe, we can be free and responsible when our choices are caused by a controller. If this leaves us with an intuitive draw, it can be argued that the incompatibilist loses, since it was he who proposed the controller argument to discredit compatibilism.

Here I run the argument replacing a limited controller with God. This move is mentioned in the current literature, but it has not been developed.⁶ Positing a divine controller improves the argument in a number of ways, one of which deserves mention at the outset. The dispute here

³Kane, *Significance of Free Will*, 65.

⁴The qualifier "by something other than yourself" is required to take account of situations in which you have freely and responsibly constructed a situation such that your choice is causally necessitated by that situation. In that case we might still hold you responsible.

⁵Nowadays many philosophers allow that determinism is likely to be false, in that there is good reason to believe that some things act indeterministically on the subatomic level. The determinism that is of interest to us is on the level of middle-sized objects, especially human agents, and I shall use the term "determinism" to apply to that level without meaning by it that absolutely all events are determined.

⁶For example, Derk Pereboom quotes a devoted Calvinist in drawing out and making vivid the entailments of insisting that we may be free and blameworthy though controlled ("A Hard-line Reply to the Multiple-Case Manipulation Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77 [2008], 160–170, see especially 165–167). But he does not make the divine controller case the focus of his argument.

is a battle of intuitions, and it may be relevant that the limited controller, the mad neuroscientist or the megalomaniac behavioral engineer are the inventions of philosophers to serve a fleeting purpose, while God has a history and a following such that He must be taken seriously. The limited controllers are “thin,” bizarre, and evanescent, which makes them suspect as “intuition pumps.” By “thin” I mean that *all* there is to them is their role in the controller argument. They are bizarre figures, so it can be argued that their weirdness is doing much of the heavy lifting in eliciting the looked-for intuition. And they are evanescent. We do not *really* have to worry about them since they exist only as fanciful hypotheses, safely confined to the pages of philosophical literature. As we do our philosophy, we may commit to consequences involving these characters because we believe that it is safe to do so. The consequences, like the characters, will not “slop over” into “real life.” However, if we—or even just most of our forebears and many of our neighbors—believed the controller to exist in reality, then we might be more cautious about the conclusions we accept regarding the controller scenario.

God, on the other hand, is not “thin.” The concept of God is systematic and complex, so intuitions in His regard will not be based solely on a narrow role in the controller argument. And, while God may be bizarre in the sense that He is a very unusual sort of person, He is nonetheless a common and well-known figure in Western thought. And the idea of God has an importance that the ideas of the mad neuroscientist and of the megalomaniac behavioral engineer do not. Our intuitions regarding the God hypothesis are correspondingly likely to be more serious.

II. The Divine Controller Argument

Let us now sketch and then develop the divine controller argument.

1. If God causally necessitates your choice, then you are not morally responsible for it.
2. Causal necessitation of your choice due to natural causes in a deterministic universe is relevantly similar to divine causal necessitation.⁷

Therefore

3. If natural causes in a deterministic universe causally necessitate your choice, you are not morally responsible for it.

To defend the first premise, take an example: Say that murder is wrong and that God has commanded you not to commit murder on pain of punishment. (Let us leave Hell out of the hypothesis, since the specter of an infinite punishment for a finite crime might affect our intuitions.) Suppose that the punishment involved is a long period of suffering, equivalent to a life sentence without parole—the sort of punishment which is

⁷Which is not to say that divine causation is like natural causation. All I need for the argument is that both can causally necessitate an effect.

standard in our society today. And now suppose that God directly causes in you a choice to commit murder, which necessitates your subsequently committing murder. Do you *deserve* that God should punish you? Surely not! But why not? Because He *made* you choose to murder! Could our intuition be driven by repugnance at God *himself* punishing you for what He made you do? God is, by hypothesis, perfectly just. If you deserve to be punished, He ought to punish you. But allow that the punishment will not be done by God, but by human agents. Still, God made you choose, and so it seems that you do not deserve to be punished.

Note that the hypothesis does not entail that God Himself has committed a murder. He has merely caused you to choose and, subsequently, to murder. Nor, by hypothesis, has God done anything wrong. Perhaps your committing the murder is a necessary part of the larger divine plan aimed at some great good which would otherwise be unobtainable. (Kant might disapprove of this suggestion, but Augustine and Aquinas both make similar claims.) Note also that I associate moral responsibility with a strong concept of desert; in order to be morally responsible you must be *deserving* of praise and blame and hence, in the right situations, of reward and punishment.⁸ So in asking whether or not you *deserve* to be punished, we are not asking the broader question of whether or not you ought to be punished. Many philosophers uncouple punishment—the inflicting of pain and suffering on someone in response to their bad behavior—from desert, and do not find the concept of desert compelling.⁹ If someone does not share the intuition that justice entails that the unrepentant evil-doer deserves to suffer and the good deserve to be happy, it is difficult to say much more to motivate agreement. And perhaps it is this fundamental disagreement over desert that in large part drives the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists. All I need here is the intuition that, in justice, you do not *deserve* to be punished for a deed God made you do. There may be good reasons to inflict pain and suffering on you, but it will not be because you deserve it. If the concept of desert does not find a place in your moral landscape such that you have no strong intuitions about what agents may or may not deserve, then you will find the divine controller argument unmotivated.

And so back to the murder. Perhaps it is good and right that God causes you to choose to murder and that we subsequently inflict pain on you. But you cannot, in justice, be held responsible for what God *made* you do. Of course, He did not make you do it *against your will*, but He made you do it

⁸Derk Pereboom agrees that this is the understanding of moral responsibility that underlies and drives the free will debate. See Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, and Vargas, *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 86–87, 197–198. He refers to the concept in question as *basic* desert, and does not attempt to justify what he takes to be a wide-spread belief in basic desert, which is not surprising since, ultimately, he defends hard determinism.

⁹Daniel Dennett allows that determinism entails that we do not have “in-the-eyes-of-God” guilt, but that we have enough freedom to be responsible, since punishment will affect how we behave; see *Elbow Room* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 156–165.

nonetheless. But why does God's making you choose conflict with your responsibility? The reason is that the decisive causal impetus necessitating your choice does not come from you, but from God. It is not under your control and precedes your choice logically and perhaps temporally.¹⁰ We can develop the divine controller argument a little more:

1. If God causally necessitates your choice, you are not morally responsible for it *because* the causal impetus necessitating your choice is not under your control and precedes your choice logically and perhaps temporally.
2. Causal necessitation of your choice due to natural causes in a deterministic universe is relevantly similar to divine causal necessitation.

Therefore

3. If natural causes in a deterministic universe causally necessitate your choice, you are not morally responsible for it.

Compatibilism is false. Q.E.D.

III. Divine Control versus Natural Determinism

The compatibilist will respond that this is far too fast. For one thing, there may be a relevant difference between the divine controller and natural determinism such that Premise 2 is false and so the conclusion that there is no responsibility in a determinist universe can be blocked.¹¹ This is one of the critiques Alfred Mele levels against Derk Pereboom's controller argument, the four-case manipulation argument. Pereboom presents four cases where agents' choices are determined. He begins with a limited controller case where the controllers directly manipulate an agent's mental processes to produce a given choice. He holds that it is intuitively obvious that the controlled agent is not responsible in this case. Then he moves progressively through three more cases. The second involves indirect control through programming. In the third, control is exercised through rigorous training. The fourth results in the same consequences for necessitated choice on the part of the agent as in the third, but the causes are natural, not produced by a controller. Pereboom argues that, just as it is intuitively obvious in the first case, the three succeeding cases are sufficiently similar that they should elicit the intuition that the agent is not responsible, and this includes case four, where natural causes produce the agent's choice in the determinist universe.

¹⁰Classical theists may want to make the Anselmian move, which holds that the motive power for your free choice comes from God, but the opting for this over that comes from you. See Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom*, 117–121.

¹¹Bernard Berofsky, "Global Control and Freedom," *Philosophical Studies* 131 (2006), 419–445; David Blumenfeld, "Freedom and Mind Control," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), 215–227; Bruce Waller, "Free Will Gone Out of Control," *Behaviorism* 16 (1988), 149–157; and Gary Watson, "Free Action and Free Will," *Mind* 96 (1987), 145–172.

Mele counters that it may not be the hypothesis of determinism that elicits the intuition that the agents in the four cases are not responsible. He argues that we can construct cases analogous to Pereboom's 1 and 2 where there is indeterminism in the process of control and yet our intuition regarding the agent's lack of responsibility remains unchanged. Thus it is not the causal determination that elicits the intuition.¹² He writes, "for all Pereboom has shown, it is the manipulation, not the deterministic causation, that does the intuition-driving work in his cases."¹³ Pereboom, in turn, responds that what Mele's analogous cases likely show is that "determinism nevertheless explains [the agent's] non-responsibility in [Pereboom's] Case 2, while a deeper fact, such as the presence of causal circumstances that precludes responsibility-relevant control, explains his non-responsibility in both [the original and Mele's analogous] cases."¹⁴

Mele does not try to pinpoint exactly what the relevant difference between the manipulator and natural determinism is. I will argue that the possibly relevant differences between a limited controller and the determinist universe disappear when the controller at issue is God. So what might the relevant differences be? In the limited controller case in which the mad scientist causes your choice, especially if it is a choice to do something wrong, we might hold that there is something morally wicked, or at least suspect, in the controller's behavior. And couldn't the presence of a blameworthy agent—other than you—in the history of your choice, drive our intuition that you should not be held responsible? With the *limited* controller this point has traction. We have, after all, hypothesized a *mad* scientist or a *megalomaniac* behavioral engineer. History demonstrates that when mere mortals put themselves *in loco divinitatis* and attempt to control their fellows, things go badly for the would-be controlled. Perhaps these thoughts form part of the background of our intuition that the controlled agent is not free. And since natural causes in a determinist universe cannot be accused of moral turpitude, we have reason to believe that the causation exercised by the controller is relevantly different from the natural causes at work in a determinist universe. But with the divine controller what drives the intuition cannot be moral qualms about the behavior of the controller. God is necessarily good, so our unwillingness to ascribe moral responsibility to you when God causes you to choose to murder cannot arise from our holding that God has behaved badly and so must bear all, most, or at least some, of the responsibility.

Nonetheless we may hold that, even if we have to allow the controller's goodness *ex hypothesi*, you are still being used by another agent, and it is resentment at the thought of being used that drives our intuition that you are not responsible in the divine controller case. The deterministic universe has

¹² Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 138–144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴ Derk Pereboom, "On Free Will and Luck," *Philosophical Explorations* 10 (2007), 163–172, see 170.

no purposes, so it is not *using* us and the situation is relevantly different. But we can alter the divine controller case to ensure that you are not being used in ways you could properly resent. We could say that, before God causes your choice to murder, he shows you his plan, and you, seeing the benefits that will ultimately be produced by your crime and punishment, agree to allow him to cause the choice. (If your agreement is not freely given we may be opening the way for an infinite regress, so perhaps we could add here that God has bestowed on you an ability to make a libertarian free choice for just long enough for you to choose to agree that God should cause you to make the choice to murder.) Then he erases your memory and causes the choice—but you agreed to it, so you are not really being used.¹⁵

Or suppose—contrary to the fact, alas—that God had made our world one in which good deeds are rewarded with earthly benefits. Now God, to achieve some purpose of his own, causes you to do something extremely good for which he ensures that you reap the significant reward. Maybe you win the lottery for six million dollars and live a long, healthy, happy life, dying peacefully in bed surrounded by friends and loved ones. I would hold that, intuitively, you do not *deserve* your good fortune. You just did what God made you do, and if he'd made me do the good deed, I'd be the rich and happy one. It seems to me that the same conclusion about desert would follow if we posit that it is the deterministic universe, rather than God, that has made you do the good thing. Since you were made to do the good deed, you don't really deserve any reward. In this case we cannot point to a difference between the divine and the natural controller based on the premise that you resent being used by the divine controller. You're happy as a clam, and it would be odd for you to resent it!

Still, someone might argue that, whether or not you agreed to it, or resent it, in both of these examples you are still an instrument in the divine plan. You are being used for a purpose and that indicates an ineradicable difference between the divine controller and the deterministic universe. So change the example just a little more. God causes you to choose to murder (or to do the extremely good deed) for no reason at all. There is no plan or purpose. Those unfamiliar with the history of western theism might suppose that a God who wills something without their being a good reason for it is a fanciful invention, kin to the mad neuroscientist and the megalomaniacal behavioral engineer. But no. There is a major strand in the philosophy of religion, going back at least to Alghazali in the eleventh century and ably represented by William of Ockham, that insists upon the primacy of the divine will, even above the divine intellect. God,

¹⁵I grant that this is an odd case. Could we argue that, since you agreed to have it caused in you, you are responsible for the choice to murder? But the situation we have envisioned is one in which the choice to murder, if it is a responsible choice, is *blameworthy*. Are you properly blamed for the murder and simultaneously properly praised for agreeing to have the choice to murder caused in you and so to suffer as an instrument of the divine plan? For a similar, but even stranger, suggestion see Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 1–25.

according to this school of thought, is unqualifiedly free to choose anything logically possible. The Good is whatever God should choose. Thus his will is necessarily "good" and is not constrained by anything. He may cause a choice in a created agent without this being "in order to" achieve anything. He just causes it. So the created agent is not being *used* as a means to an end any more than if his choice were caused for no purpose by a deterministic universe.¹⁶

So we cannot ascribe morally doubtful qualities to the divine controller, and we can construct scenarios in which the controlled agent is not being used. Still, isn't there, in the controller scenario, whether we are talking about a limited or a divine controller, an inevitable element of *intervention*, of *manipulation*, by the controller, which is just not there in the deterministic universe? With the limited controller it would seem that some sort of intervention or manipulation would have to be part of the scenario, but not necessarily with the divine controller. Intervention and manipulation, I take it, imply that the controlled agent exists independently of the controller such that the controller must "step in" and tinker with the agent. Someone who intervenes or manipulates introduces changes which turn the agent from the path he likely would have followed. If we take our divine controller to be the God of classical theism—of Thomas Aquinas, as the prime example—then complete divine control does not entail any intervening *per se*. Classical theism holds that God's creation consists in sustaining everything in being from moment to moment. Absolutely every created thing that has any ontological status is immediately caused by God simultaneously with its existence.¹⁷ Thus nothing which is not God—no object, no positive property, no action—exists independently of God's directly causing it.¹⁸

This is not to deny the sorts of causes that science describes. The causal connections we observe in nature are real and play the explanatory role which science ascribes to them. To pick a standard medieval example, we can observe fire burning cotton. If we then ask, "What caused the cotton to burn?," the correct answer is "the fire." But all of the objects with their properties and their behavior—the whole system of cause and effect—is kept in being immediately by God. In the parlance of Thomas's day, God is the primary cause and the natural causes are secondary causes; secondary not in any temporal sense, but in the hierarchical sense that they

¹⁶It could be claimed that the divinely controlled agent is different from the agent in the deterministic universe because he has been uniquely "singled out." His choices are not caused in the "normal" way. That is easily answered by hypothesizing that every non-divine agent is a divinely controlled agent.

¹⁷Thomas would take it that a metaphysics in which a cause must, by definition, precede its effect temporally is deeply misguided.

¹⁸Even the laws of logic and mathematics do not exist independently of God, but rather are reflections of his nature as necessary being. Something might rightly be said to have the property of "being evil," but evil *per se* is an absence or lack of what ought to be there, and so "being evil" is not a positive property. On this view God could be said to cause an evil choice, without his being the cause of evil *per se*.

are dependent upon God for their existence. What caused the cotton to burn? The fire as the secondary cause and God as the primary cause. But God did not “intervene” or “manipulate” either the fire or the cotton. He simply caused them to exist as what they are with all their properties and behavior. So we can hypothesize a God who is sustaining everything in being from moment to moment, even you with your choices and subsequent actions.¹⁹ (This does not rule out the possibility of God producing unlooked-for effects—miracles. But in order to counter the “intervener” point all we need is an instance of God causing your choice in a way that does not suggest that you exist independently of God such that He interferes as a limited controller would have to do.²⁰) So, while God may be a complete divine controller, He need not be a manipulator or intervener. In the divine controller argument your lack of responsibility for the choice to murder cannot be ascribed to your having been mistreated, used, or even simply manipulated, by the controller.

Could it be that our intuition about the controller is really rooted in the simple fact that we resent conforming to what someone else wants us to do? Surely not. In the course of our lives we do many, many things that other people want us to do. It would be bizarre to suggest that that alone interferes with moral responsibility. Suppose there is an ideal observer who, without causing you to do anything, observes everything you do. And suppose it turns out that everything you do is just what the ideal observer wants you to do. There is no element in this picture to vitiate your moral responsibility. Nor can your lack of responsibility be ascribed to the divine controller knowing ahead of time what you will choose. Divine foreknowledge does not translate into divine, or any other sort, of problematic necessitation of the foreknown. In fact it can be reconciled with our choices being “up to us” in the sense requisite for libertarian freedom.²¹ What is worrisome in the controller scenario is not that someone *wants* us to do something, or that someone might *know* beforehand

¹⁹I would consider Thomas a compatibilist, in that he holds that, while our choices are caused by something other than ourselves—God as primary cause—we are still responsible. Of course, our choices are also caused by us, as secondary causes. See *Summa Theologiae* 1, Q.83, art.1, ad.3 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1:68. Brian Shanley, O.P., argues that, since the divine causation in question is not the temporally antecedent natural causation posited by contemporary determinism, it is better not to label Thomas a compatibilist (“Beyond Libertarianism and Compatibilism: Thomas Aquinas on Created Freedom,” in *Freedom and the Human Person*, ed. Richard Velkley [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 70–89). Hugh McCann has recently proposed a view very close to Thomas’s. See “Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will,” *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995), 582–598; “Sovereignty and Freedom: A Reply to Rowe,” *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), 110–116; and “The Author of Sin?,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), 144–159. In response see Katherin Rogers, “Does God Cause Sin? Anselm of Canterbury versus Jonathan Edwards on Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003), 371–378 and “God is not the Author of Sin,” *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), 300–310.

²⁰This is the thesis of Hugh McCann, “Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will.”

²¹See Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom*, chaps. 8 and 9.

that we will do something. That leaves the worry that someone *makes* us do something.

Taking a cue from Pereboom's progressive, four-case argument, I propose that our intuition about moral responsibility should stay the same as we hypothesize a divine controller whose causal activity is mediated and so comes to look more and more like that at work in a determinist universe. Suppose, in a departure from classical theism, that God sustains the world in being from moment to moment indirectly by immediately causing an angelic intelligence which, in turn, causes and sustains everything that is not God or the angel. God is immediately sustaining this angelic intelligence in being, and causing it to cause everything else that there is, including you and your choice to murder. (Note that there is still no question of intervention or manipulation since you do not exist independently.) So your choice is caused directly by the angelic intelligence and only indirectly by God. Do you *now* deserve to be punished? But there is no important difference here between the divine controller *simpliciter*, and the divine controller causing through the divinely controlled angelic controller, is there? Your choice is not "up to you." It is still up to God, but at one remove. Adding a chain of angels, a multi-tiered hierarchy of simultaneous angelic causes, would not add anything in which your aseity, and hence your moral responsibility, could be grounded. Nor would replacing the angelic intelligence with a mechanistic cause or chain of causes. If God creates a machine which makes you along with your choice, or which makes *another* machine which makes you, there has been no element either added or subtracted to produce the sort of new situation in which your moral responsibility can be grounded.

Suppose, instead of simultaneous causal activity, we hypothesize that the divine controller—now quite distant from the God of classical theism—operates through a temporally successive series of causes, starting before your conception, which brings you and, later, your subsequent choice, into being. Again, there seems to be nothing in this picture which should change our original assessment. If your choice is caused by God, you are not responsible for it. Finally, take the above suggestion one step further. Suppose that God should arrange all the necessitating causes for you and your choice to murder within the initial singularity, should light the fuse for the Big Bang, and then, *per impossibile*, should blink out of being. Now the determining chain of natural causes unfolds following the divine plan but without immediate divine guidance up to the point where you choose to murder and commit the murder. *Now* do you deserve to be punished? I do not see that, with the point that God is the ultimate cause of your choice remaining the same, the absence of God at the time you come to trial injects anything into (or subtracts anything from) the situation sufficient to ground your aseity and moral responsibility.

And if it is the fact that we are made to do something that conflicts with our having genuine aseity and moral responsibility, then it is difficult to see the relevant difference between *someone* doing the making

and *something* such as the causes at work in a deterministic universe.²² There seems to be nothing relevant to distinguish our final hypothetical universe where God arranges everything and then disappears leaving the chain of causes to unfold and the deterministic universe without God in its pre-history. If you are not responsible for the choice to murder in the former, then you are not responsible in the latter. If an agent who is divinely controlled is not morally responsible, then an agent whose choices are caused by a deterministic universe is not morally responsible.

IV. A Tollens Response?

The compatibilist may agree with that last proposition, but negate the consequent. That is, he may believe that Premise 2 in the divine controller argument is true, but that Premise 1 is false. And he can argue his point by running a sort of *tollens* version of the divine controller argument.

- 1*. Even if natural causes in a deterministic universe causally necessitate your choice, you may nonetheless be morally responsible for it.
2. Causal necessitation of your choice due to natural causes in a deterministic universe is relevantly similar to divine causal necessitation.

Therefore

- 3*. Even if God causally necessitates your choice, you may nonetheless be morally responsible for it.

Call this the “*tollens*” argument.

According to the compatibilist, you can be responsible even in a deterministic universe, assuming you meet the criteria for responsibility proposed by the compatibilist. So the compatibilist can hold that if Premise 2 is true, it follows that you can be responsible although divinely controlled, again assuming you meet the proper criteria. The compatibilist may allow that neither the incompatibilist’s divine controller argument nor his own *tollens* argument can be shown to have more intuitive power or argumentative support than its rival. And so the discussion over which argument is more plausible ends in a draw. But in that case, it could be argued, the compatibilist wins, since it was the incompatibilist who proposed the controller argument in order to show that compatibilism is mistaken.²³

²²Perhaps the critic might point to the fact that the controller is one thing while “the causes at work in the deterministic universe” are many and complex (Marius Usher, “Control, Choice, and the Convergence/Divergence Dynamics: A Compatibilistic Probabilistic Theory of Free Will,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 103 [2006], 188–213, see 210–213). But it is not clear what sort of relevant distinction could be drawn from this. In any case, the defender of the divine controller argument could construct a scenario in which God introduces all sorts of complex causes in addition to his act of primary causation.

²³Michael McKenna, “A Hard-Line Reply to Pereboom’s Four-Case Manipulation Argument,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77 (2008), 142–159.

But this is a bit hasty. There is an asymmetry between the divine controller and the *tollens* arguments.²⁴ The premise in the divine controller argument says that if God causes your choice you are not morally responsible. So, for example, it just isn't *fair* for God, or anyone, to punish you for a murder that God caused you to choose and commit. I take this to be an intuitive claim which is immediate (you see it as soon as you understand the terms), powerful, and widely accepted. This intuitive strength is taken to provide strong *prima facie* reason to accept the claim. The premise in the *tollens* argument—although you are determined you can be morally responsible—certainly cannot lay claim to that sort of intuitive support. To be plausible at all, it must assume a fairly sophisticated form of compatibilism. Among compatibilists there are many different views on what the proper criteria for moral responsibility are. Each view has its adherents, but they are comparatively few, being drawn from the already small pool of those who study metaphysics. And they were brought to their conclusion by lengthy argument, often beginning with dissatisfaction with libertarianism, not by some immediate “seeing” that it must be the case. The premise in the *tollens* argument does not have the *prima facie* intuitive strength that the premise in the divine controller argument does. That means that when we arrive at the intuitively difficult conclusion that we are morally responsible—we *deserve to be punished or rewarded*—even if our choices are caused by God, our reason to accept the conclusion, rather than rejecting the premise, is comparatively weak.

The compatibilist could argue that if we limit our “intuition pool” to those who are educated about the issues, Premise 1* in the *tollens* argument might have significant appeal based on accepting the truth of the conjunction of two claims; (a) we are free and responsible and (b) indeterminist accounts of choice cannot successfully ground our freedom and responsibility. So, if we are indeed free and responsible, it must be possible for us to be free and responsible on a determinist view.²⁵ Claim (a) does seem intuitively powerful and widespread. Can (b) make the same boast? Presumably, accepting (b) would be based on having rejected attempts to construct indeterminist accounts of free and responsible action. Robert Kane, for example, has proposed a libertarian analysis of free will which involves sophisticated and plausible responses to claim (b).²⁶ Upon long and careful study, some might, I suppose, decide that Kane's arguments, and similar efforts along those lines, fail. And some might go even further and conclude that future attempts at a successful libertarian account are doomed. It would take a lot of study, then, to conclude that claim (b) is justified. Thus, unless we draw the circle of the “educated” to ensure the

²⁴Derk Pereboom, “A Hard-line Reply,” makes a somewhat similar point, but the case can be made more forcefully in the context of the divine controller argument.

²⁵Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, as a “reflective agnostic” offers a tentative suggestion along these lines, 191.

²⁶Robert Kane, “Responsibility, Luck, and Chance,” *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999), 217–240.

result, it seems wildly improbably that “you are determined yet free and responsible” has the same intuitive force as “you don’t deserve to be punished for what God made you do.”

I stand by the claim that there is an asymmetry between the first premises of the divine controller and the *tollens* arguments. And this asymmetry entails a burden of proof on the compatibilist to strengthen the premise in the *tollens* argument or else show that the conclusion is not as difficult as it intuitively appears at first. And here the contemporary compatibilist may well insist that he has in fact been hard at work doing both of these things at once. Much of the thrust of contemporary compatibilism has been aimed at responding to the libertarian’s traditional claim, the claim that I take to support the original intuition in the controller case: in order for us to be morally responsible, our choices must be “up to us” in the right way. Contemporary compatibilists propose criteria which would ground the claim that a determined agent could be morally responsible, making determined choices which are nonetheless properly from himself, *a se*. To the extent that their theories are attractive, the premise in the *tollens* argument is strengthened, and the power of the original intuition driving the divine controller argument is vitiated to the point where, as the *tollens* argument concludes, we should allow that divine causation of your choice does not conflict with your freedom. However, it is my contention that contemporary compatibilist theories fail to do the job, leaving the *tollens* move ultimately unsuccessful.

V. Two Examples of the Tollens Move

In defense of my contention, I look briefly at two recent compatibilist theories, one proposed by Lynne Rudder Baker and the other by Alfred Mele, both of which explicitly raise the controller argument and make the *tollens* move. My responses to these two positions can, I think, be applied with similar effect against other compatibilist views, *mutatis mutandis*.

Baker endorses Frankfurt’s account wherein harmony between one’s first- and second-order desires and volitions plays a crucial role in one’s having real freedom. But on Frankfurt’s account, the harmony is *sufficient* for moral responsibility, which leaves the view open to attack from the controller argument. If the mad neuroscientist (Baker’s preferred controller) produces your first-order desires, and also produces the second-order desires by which you embrace and identify with your first-order desires, it seems very odd to hold you free and responsible. Baker argues that Frankfurt’s account can be shielded from the controller problem with the additional criterion that the responsible agent must reflectively endorse the beliefs and desires on which he acts. The idea is roughly this: Suppose an agent could know that the desires and beliefs which have produced her wanting to will X were produced by causal factors beyond her control. If, with this knowledge, the agent would still have “willed X, and wanted to will X and willed X because she* wanted to will X,” then we should consider her responsible. (The “*” follows “she” to indicate the desires and

beliefs to be from a first-person perspective.)²⁷ Baker writes, "If I can say, 'These desires reflect who I am, and this is the kind of person that I want to be,' then (surely!) I am morally responsible for acting on those desires—whether determinism is true or not."²⁸

Baker argues that the Reflective-Endorsement view does not succumb to the controller argument. First, in order to be morally responsible, a being must have a first-person perspective, but the mad neuroscientist, in Baker's view, cannot supply the agent with a first-person perspective through brain manipulation. This point fails against the *divine* controller argument, since God can create someone with a first-person perspective without any "manipulation" at all. Baker goes on to argue that, for someone who already has a first-person perspective, if, knowing that his wanting to will X is the effect of the mad neuroscientist, he would repudiate willing X, then he would not be responsible for willing X. If, with the same knowledge, he would still want to will X, then he would be responsible.

Baker notes that the incompatibilist might push the controller argument another step and posit that the mad neuroscientist is the cause of the informed agent's still wanting to will X and adds a completeness clause, "There is no further knowledge of the circumstances of the agent's endorsement of his willing X that would lead the agent to repudiate his endorsement of his willing X." An agent who would repudiate wanting to will X if he knew that the neuroscientist was the source of his not repudiating it is not responsible for willing X. An agent who would still want to will X is responsible.

Apply Baker's analysis to the example I used in the divine controller argument: God causes you to choose to murder. He causes in you a first-order volition to murder, and He causes in you a second-order volition to desire to murder. He causes you such that you embrace and identify with your willing to murder. At this point in the example, if we ask whether or not you deserve to be punished, I take it that most of us still share the original intuition—of course not! Now add Baker's Reflective-Endorsement criterion. God makes you such that, if you knew that He is the cause of your endorsing your willing to murder, you would nonetheless remain steadfast in endorsing your willing to murder. Add that God is the cause of your nonetheless remaining steadfast, and include the completeness point—God makes you such that, if you had complete knowledge of the causes of your willing to murder, and you knew that He is the cause of your nonetheless remaining steadfast in your desire, you would *still* endorse your willing to murder. On Baker's account, although the first- and second-order volitions and the reflective endorsing are all caused by God, you meet the criteria for responsibility. It is just to punish you for the murder. Thus, even if your choice is caused by a deterministic universe,

²⁷Lynne Rudder Baker, "Moral Responsibility without Libertarianism," *Nous* 40 (2006), 307–330, see 316–317.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 318.

you are responsible, and so, assuming you meet the criteria, you can be responsible even when God causes your choice.

The incompatibilist is likely to remain unmoved. The reason for saying that you are not responsible when God causes your choices was that your choices did not originate with you. Baker has added a number of criteria, but, once they are spelled out within the divine controller argument, it is clear that they do not contribute anything at all towards securing aseity for the agent. They do not add or subtract anything which should make us change our minds regarding the original intuition. If, as the intuition holds, I am not free and responsible when God directly makes me choose X, then I am not free and responsible when God directly makes me *want* to choose X even though I know everything there is to know about how He has made me want to choose X. But if neither of these actions on my part is free, it seems unlikely that their conjunction would be free. So I am not free and responsible when He directly makes me to choose X *and* directly makes me want to choose X even though I know everything there is to know about how He has made me want to choose X. Contrary to Baker's claim, if I can say, "These desires reflect who [God has made me to be], and this is the kind of person that [God has made me] want to be," then (surely!) I am [not!] morally responsible for acting on these desires—[God being the author of all].

Or take, as a different example, the complex analysis of autonomy which Alfred Mele offers in his 1995 *Autonomous Agents*. He holds that an agent who meets his proposed criteria may be free and responsible even if determined, and he explicitly addresses the controller argument. Mele explains that to be psychologically autonomous one must first be an "ideally self-controlled agent." That is (to offer a very sketchy outline) one must meet four criteria: (1) One must have self-control which ranges across all the relevant categories—overt actions, mental actions, intentions, beliefs, etc. etc. (2) One must exercise self-control, not errantly, but in support of decisive better judgments, values, etc. etc. (3) One must exercise self-control whenever one reflectively deems it appropriate, and (4) The exercises of self-control "always succeed in supporting what they are aimed at supporting."²⁹ In addition to being an ideally self-controlled agent, the psychologically autonomous agent must meet three more conditions, the "compatibilist trio":

1. The agent has no compelled* motivational states, nor any coercively produced motivational states.³⁰
2. The agent's beliefs are conducive to informed deliberation about all matters that concern him.
3. The agent is a reliable deliberator.³¹

²⁹Alfred Mele, *Autonomous Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121.

³⁰The asterisk indicates compulsion not arranged by the agent. *Ibid.*, 166.

³¹*Ibid.*, 187.

Note that meeting these criteria enables the autonomous agent to evaluate his values and “shed” them should he find sufficient reason to do so. This is an ability which Mele holds to be central to autonomy.³²

In responding to the challenge posed by Kane’s covert nonconstraining controller (CNC), Mele argues that his psychologically autonomous agent could not suffer such control since the controller must operate through control of the victim’s motivational attitudes, as in brainwashing, or through control of the victim’s informational attitudes, as in deceit, or through control of the victim’s executive qualities, as in covert conditioning. But the victim of such control would not satisfy the compatibilist trio. Mele grants that the victim of CNC is not free, but holds that an agent produced by natural causes might be determined, and yet still meet the criteria. The controller argument fails because the causes inherent in the controller scenario are sufficiently different from the causes at work in a deterministic universe to allow us to deny autonomy to the controlled agent in the former, yet still grant it to the determined agent in the latter.³³

This response to the controller argument does not work when we posit a divine controller. We can change the hypothesis so that God causes you with your choice to murder and causes you in such a way that you meet every one of Mele’s criteria. God causes you as a person capable of evaluating and possibly shedding your values. He causes you to be ideally self-controlled. He causes your properly formed motivational states. There is no compulsion. (Compulsion, for Mele, means, in addition to literal, physical force, the sort of state induced by irresistible desire, such as drug addiction.³⁴ But there is nothing like that here.) God causes the required sort of belief formation and the subsequent beliefs. And He causes the reliable deliberations which lead you to the choice to murder—which He causes as well.

Mele addresses a similar supposition, hypothesizing a creator who creates an adult agent with all of the requisites for autonomy. He concludes, making the *tollens* move, that someone whose choices are caused by (his analogue of) a divine controller in such a way that his criteria for autonomy are met is indeed autonomous.³⁵ More recently, Mele has introduced a somewhat different controller argument, the “zygote” argument. This argument is rather like my penultimate development of the divine controller argument in which God causes your choice through a temporal sequence of natural, necessitating causes. I held that, since there was no change as regards your aseity from the initial case in which God simply causes your choice immediately, we should not change our view that you are not responsible. In Mele’s argument the motivating example is this:

³²Ibid., 153, 190.

³³Ibid., 187–189.

³⁴Ibid., 136–137.

³⁵Ibid., 190. His version is most like my case where God arranges everything at the Big Bang.

Diana creates a zygote, *Z*, in Mary because she wants event *E* to occur thirty years later. Diana is in a determinist universe and knows what the state of the universe is right before she creates *Z* and what the laws of nature are. She deduces that *Z* will develop into an agent, Ernie, who will *A* and thus bring about *E* in thirty years. Ernie has all of the attributes and engages in all of the processes Mele takes to satisfy a compatibilist account of sufficient conditions for *A*-ing freely. Analogous to the divine controller argument, the first premise of the zygote argument states that Ernie is not a free and responsible agent. The second premise notes that "there is no significant difference between the way Ernie's zygote comes to exist and the way any normal human zygote comes to exist in a deterministic universe." And the conclusion is that "determinism precludes free action and moral responsibility."³⁶

Mele holds that, given the point mentioned above that many of the educated have serious doubts about the possibility of free and responsible action on the part of agents making indeterminated choices, one might intuitively reject the first premise of the zygote argument. In that case, Ernie may be free and responsible even though Diana has created him through his zygote such that he will *A* to effect *E*. Mele says that he is himself agnostic and notes that many factors drive intuitions. For example, if *A* is a praiseworthy action we may be more likely to hold Ernie responsible than if it is a blameworthy one.³⁷ In response, I grant that our intuitions are inexact and can mislead, but casting the example within the *divine* controller argument simplifies the elements involved and clarifies the situation. As I suggested above, it seems clear that if you do what you do because God makes you do it, you are not responsible. If you do evil, you do not deserve the blame and punishment, and if you do good, you do not deserve the praise and reward. There is relevant symmetry involved in God making you do the evil or the good in that in neither case do you choose *a se*. In both cases the decisive causal impetus for the choice is from God and not from you. And given that symmetry, there should be no asymmetry in our views about your deserts.³⁸

Pursuing the question of what might affect our intuitions, Mele goes on to suggest that one's view of the nature of causation may be relevant. Suppose Diana and Ernie inhabit a universe with Humean causation. There is no causal necessitation at work, but only regularities. (Or, if you take the Humean theory to be epistemic rather than metaphysical, there is no *knowable* causal necessitation. For our purposes either interpretation grounds the same problem.) The "laws" cannot actually be known until the universe has ended, since only then can it be ascertained what

³⁶Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, 188–189.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 193.

³⁸This point counts tellingly against views such as Susan Wolf's (*Freedom within Reason*), which hold that the determined agent who chooses well is responsible, while the determined agent who chooses badly is not.

regularities occurred consistently, if any. It is in part Ernie's doing *A* that brings about the "laws." Diana cannot ensure that Ernie will do *A* even with her perfect knowledge of the state of the universe before she makes *Z*. Unless she knows all the future she cannot know the "laws," and, in any case, whatever is involved in her (supposed) creation of *Z*, there is no (known) causal necessity that *Z* will grow into Ernie or that Ernie will *A*, since there is no (known) causal necessity at all. If *Z* grows into Ernie, and Ernie *A*'s, it will not be due (or cannot be known to be due) to Diana's efforts. Mele suggests that doubts about the possibility of ours being a Humean universe might lead one to deny the force of the zygote argument.³⁹

I would go a step further and argue that, on a Humean analysis of causation, no version of the controller argument can get off the ground. There are many versions and interpretations of Humeanism, but standardly the view involves at least two core commitments: (1) The observed fact that events of type *Q* have consistently followed events of type *P* does not justify the claim that events of type *Q* occur *because of* events of type *P*. A constant conjunction does not justify asserting a necessary causal connection. We are not in a position to assert any necessary causal connections at all. (2) For all we know, if an event of type *P* occurs in the future, it will not be followed by an event of type *Q*. Indeed, we cannot make any justified claims about what the future will hold. But the controller argument hypothesizes that the controller can *control*, that the controller *causes*, the agent to make some choice. In a Humean universe, assuming we are talking about a limited "controller" who operates within the physical system, we are never justified in claiming that the controller controls. This is true even of the mad neurosurgeon who (supposedly) directly acts on the brain of the would-be controlled. As with Mele's case of Diana, if the controller pushes the button which he supposes to cause choice *X* in the agent, and the agent then chooses *X*, we are not justified in asserting that the controller *produced* the choice to *X* in the agent. At the most, if we knew the entire history of the universe, we might be able to claim a regularity. But that is not *control*. The very hypothesis of a limited controller is at odds with a Humean analysis of causation.

What about a divine controller who transcends the universe of Humean causation? There have been theists who argued for a divine controller operating on a Humean universe. Alghazali, the famous Muslim fideist, gives roughly the reasons Hume gives for skepticism about causation between the objects and events in the physical universe. He comes to the conclusion that God is the immediate cause of everything that happens and there are no causal connections between objects and events. On this occasionalist view, we could (and do!) hypothesize a God who causes your choices. The problem is that, in the occasionalist universe, Premise 2 of the divine controller argument is just false. Divine causation, where

³⁹Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, 194. See also, Helen Beebe and Alfred Mele, "Humean Compatibilism," *Mind* 111 (2002), 201–224.

God brings things about, is not relevantly like causation in the natural universe, since there is no “bringing about” sort of causation in the natural universe. At most, there are only regularities.

The controller argument depends upon assuming a necessitarian analysis of causation—or, at least, a non-Humean analysis. It requires the assumption that causes, divine or natural, bring about effects. The Humean has more against the zygote argument than just intuitive doubts about the first premise. Diana’s actions do not (to our knowledge) produce *Z*, so the initial hypothesis conflicts with a Humean universe. The second premise holds that “there is no significant difference between the way Ernie’s zygote comes to exist and the way any normal human zygote comes to exist in a deterministic universe.” But in a Humean universe we are justified in making claims neither about how *Z* came into being nor about how normal human zygotes come into being. (Even on the level of observed regularities, how many normal zygotes have you seen coming into being?) The Humean, then, should not allow the second premise or the original Diana-maker-of-*Z* thought experiment. Mele’s point regarding the effect of Humeanism on one’s intuitive response to the first premise seems to miss the mark. The Humean is not in a position to make the *tollens* argument in response to the divine controller argument.⁴⁰

The compatibilist who pushes the *tollens* argument and so denies the first premise of the divine controller argument had better do so on the basis of a plausible version of compatibilism which provides the agent with the requisites for freedom even in a (necessitarian) determined universe. I take it this is exactly what compatibilists like Mele (or “possible compatibilists” since he says he is an agnostic?) attempt to do. But in the original divine controller argument the claim was that you are not responsible because God made you to choose what you choose and your choice did not originate with you. If, in a determinist universe, you are made to choose what you choose and your choice does not originate with you, then you are similarly not responsible. Mele’s addition of his purportedly “autonomy-making” properties does not address that conclusion. If we have qualms about your responsibility when God causes your choice, why should they be alleviated when God causes your deliberating and then causes your choice? With the addition of Mele’s criteria to the agent in the divine controller example, you are simply doing more things—exercising self-control, deliberating, shedding values, etc.—that God makes you do.⁴¹ If it seemed unjust that you be punished for a murder

⁴⁰It is not surprising that a Humean view of causation has not played a role in the free will debate. Presumably, as we discuss the cluster of relevant questions, we must suppose that your choices cause your actions, that you are recognizably the same person over time, that all sorts of facts about you and the world influence how you choose, that we will not, in the next five minutes, all turn into toads with wings. Take recognizable causal connections out of the picture and all bets are off.

⁴¹Dennett, *Elbow Room*, asks us to consider, rather than the demonic neuroscientist, the “eloquent philosopher who indirectly manipulates a person’s brain” through persuasive reasons (64–65). If God causes you to choose to murder through causing your mental states

God made you choose to commit, it seems equally unjust that you be punished when God causes you to choose to murder *and* causes you to do all sorts of other things which function as secondary causes, causing you to murder. It seems implausible to hold that you are not responsible for doing X when God directly causes you to do X and only X, but you *are* responsible for doing X when God directly causes you to do X and Y and Z.

Our question was whether or not contemporary compatibilists could produce an intuitively powerful *tollens* argument against the divine controller argument, thus defeating the incompatibilist's attempt to tip the scales of debate in favor of incompatibilism. The challenge was to construct a compatibilism persuasive enough to weaken intuitive resistance to the conclusion that you *are* responsible for your divinely caused choice. But the addition of any number of other elements to the history and background of the choice, if those elements are *divinely caused*, does nothing to shake the intuition that if God causes your choice, you are not responsible. Both Baker and Mele grant that divine controller scenarios can be constructed which are sufficiently similar to their naturalist causation scenarios such that, *if* you are free and responsible in the naturalist scenario, *then* you are free and responsible in the divine controller scenario. But neither succeeds in making it really plausible that you could be free in the divine controller scenario. I suspect that other compatibilist theories would fare the same against the divine controller argument. If the original intuition that you are not free and responsible when God directly causes your choices is as wide-spread and as powerful as I take it to be, then the divine controller argument is more persuasive than the *tollens* argument and provides good reason to adopt incompatibilism.⁴²

University of Delaware

and causing the philosopher to present the persuasive reasons such that you are determined, by these factors, to choose to murder (or to choose to sell all you have and give to the poor), then it seems to me that you are not deserving of blame (or of praise). The reason we are not offended at the thought of "manipulation" by the eloquent philosopher is presumably that we assume that his eloquence does not "induce" our desires, beliefs, and decisions in a way that closes off options and determines us to one choice rather than another. He is not really analogous to the controller in the controller argument.

⁴²I thank the editor of this journal and anonymous referees for helpful comments which led to significant improvement of this paper.